

Agenda Item: _____

**CITY OF SANTA CLARITA
AGENDA REPORT**

NEW BUSINESS

City Manager Approval: _____

Item to be presented by: Paul Brotzman

DATE: November 13, 2007

SUBJECT: RESOLUTION OPPOSING THE LAS LOMAS DEVELOPMENT

DEPARTMENT: Community Development

RECOMMENDED ACTION

City Council adopt the resolution opposing the Las Lomas development.

BACKGROUND

The Las Lomas project proposes to annex into the City of Los Angeles and construct 5,500-5,800 units, 2.3 million square feet of office, 250,000 square feet of retail, a 300 room hotel, a school, a Metrolink station, a municipal services center, and a sewer treatment facility on approximately 555 acres located just north of the I-5/SR 14 interchange. The site abuts the City of Santa Clarita and is located approximately 1,000 feet from Los Angeles city limits.

ANALYSIS

The Las Lomas project is inconsistent with several goals and policies of the General Plan

The approximately 555-acre site is located within Santa Clarita's General Plan, which was adopted in June 1991. The General Plan states that it focuses on Santa Clarita's high quality of life while "preserving and enhancing the precious environmental assets and resources present in the Santa Clarita Valley. Ridgeline protection and preservation, sensitive hillside development, river maintenance policies, and protection of the native oak habitat are just a few examples of areas that the Plan emphasizes"

- **Preserving Precious Environmental Assets:** The site is within the Santa Susana Mountains Significant Ecological Area. According to the General Plan, this SEA is "largely undisturbed by the urbanization that has occurred both to the south (San

Fernando Valley) and to the north (Santa Clarita). These wilderness areas are important for maintaining gene flow and wildlife movement between the Santa Monica and San Gabriel mountains, which are now largely isolated from one another by urban development.”

- Ridgeline Protection and Preservation: The project site contains eight designated significant ridgelines totaling over three miles.
- Sensitive Hillside Development: Approximately 60% of the site contains slopes that exceed 50%.
- River Maintenance Policies: The US Geological Survey has identified seven intermittent “blue line” streams on the site, five of which flow into the City of Santa Clarita and to the Santa Clara River.
- Protection of Native Oak Habitat: The site contains thousands of oak trees.

In addition, the City’s General Plan takes into consideration the following:

- Alquist-Priolo Fault Zones: The site is located adjacent to three Alquist-Priolo Fault zones. The I-5/SR 14 interchange has collapsed twice in the 1972 and 1994 earthquakes.
- Seismic Hazard Zone: The entire site is within a Seismic Hazard Zone and subject to landslide hazards.
- Fire Hazard Zone: The site is within and adjacent to a Fire Hazard Zone.
- Access: The only means of access to the site is from The Old Road, which experiences heavy traffic congestion during peak hours and when an incident has affected traffic flow on I-5. Access in and out of the site will be difficult, if not impossible, at times. In addition, the over 70,000 daily trips generated by this project would further exacerbate the congestion on the The Old Road and I-5.

In recognition of the significant natural resources and the severe constraints of the site, the General Plan has designated the site as Residential Estate (RE), which allows for only very low density development. Under the RE designation, a maximum of 277 units would be permitted on this site, and no office or commercial uses. This number would be further reduced if the City’s Hillside Ordinance was to be applied.

The 5,500-5,800 units proposed by Las Lomas exceed the City’s General Plan density by 2,000%. The approximately three million square feet of additional uses proposed by Las Lomas would not be permitted by the City’s General Plan. The project would disrupt the wildlife corridor and SEA, grade across and construct on significant ridgelines, grade on steep slopes, impact drainage into the Santa Clara River, and remove many oak trees. In addition, it would expose structures and residents to earthquake faults, landslides, wild fires, and limitations to accessibility.

The Las Lomas project is inconsistent with many goals and policies of the City’s General Plan.

The County also recognizes the significant natural resources and severe constraints of the site. The County’s existing General Plan and zoning would allow only 180-250 units at the site. Las Lomas would exceed the existing allowable density by over 2,000%.

The Las Lomas project

The project is being billed as an example of a transit oriented development and smart growth. The City of Santa Clarita supports and encourages transit oriented developments and smart growth, however, Las Lomas cannot live up to such claims.

Transit Oriented Development (TOD): Las Lomas claims itself to be a TOD largely due to the fact that it proposes to construct a Metrolink station at the southern end of the project site. The Metrolink station is proposed to be constructed 300 feet underground in the existing train tunnel. Two 30-story elevator shafts would allow access from the project to the station.

The California Department of Transportation defines a transit oriented development (TOD) as:

Moderate to higher density development, located within an easy walk [approximately 1/2 mile] of a major transit stop, generally with a mix of residential, employment and shopping opportunities designed for pedestrians without excluding the auto. TOD can be new construction or redevelopment of one or more buildings whose design and orientation facilitate transit use. (California Department of Transportation, 2002).

According to the Specific Plan submitted to Los Angeles, 5,199 of the units, or 94%, will be located farther than 1/2 mile from the Metrolink station. Over half of the units will be located more than one mile from the station. Over 2,000 units will be located nearly 2 miles from the station. In addition, due to the steep terrain it is unlikely that any walk would be considered "easy". This is not an example of a transit oriented development.

Furthermore, the basis for the TOD claim is the proposed Metrolink station. This station is proposed to be constructed in the existing rail tunnel 300 feet below the project. According to Metrolink staff, it may necessitate improvements to the entire tunnel, which is over a mile in length and most likely could not occur without disruptions to Metrolink and freight trains, which use the racks. The stability of the underlying rock is also of concern. There are health and safety concerns regarding the affects of noise and diesel exhaust from Metrolink and freight trains on waiting passengers in an enclosed station. There are also concerns about earthquake risks. Even assuming that such a station is possible, the cost of improving the tunnel and building the station, the elevators, and a ventilation system would likely be in the hundreds of millions of dollars. The cost of on-going operation and maintenance would also be exorbitant. The feasibility and desirability of such a station is doubtful, as is the claim that Las Lomas is a TOD.

Road Improvements: It appears that Las Lomas may realize that the Metrolink station is infeasible, as Las Lomas is proposing to make significant roadway improvements to accommodate the approximately 72,000 average daily trips it will generate. It appears, however, that the road improvements are equally infeasible.

According to the attached road improvement map, prepared and recently distributed by Las Lomas, the developer proposes the following road improvements:

- The Old Road – widening from two to four lanes across much of the project site.
- Foothill Boulevard – widening from two substandard lanes to four lanes. This includes widening the portion of Foothill that clings to the cliff above I-5. It would require grading away much of the abutting hillside owned by the Metropolitan Water District, which has facilities located there. It is unlikely MWD would give up this property. This would also require the widening (more likely replacement) of two bridges over the railroad tracks and the LA aqueduct.
- Sepulveda between San Fernando and Roxford – widening from two to four lanes. This portion of Sepulveda is located between I-5 and facilities owned and operated by both Edison (a substation) and the Los Angeles Department of Water of Power (the reservoir). Right-of-way would need to be acquired by both Edison and DWP, which is unlikely as both have facilities very near the existing edge of the right-of-way.
- Sepulveda – extending Sepulveda, at four lanes, from where it currently ends at Roxford south to connect to Rinaldi. This would require obtaining up to almost 2 miles of right-of way from DWP. The alignment also appears to bisect the LA Police Department's training facility and will either have to go through an existing hotel and condominiums along I-405 or through the old dam.

It seems unlikely that the necessary right-of-way can be obtained and that such road improvements can be made. In addition, according to the Department of Public Works, a conservative estimate for these road improvements, excluding the costs of the bridges and excessive grading and buying private property, would be about \$45 million.

You'll also notice on this map that Las Lomas apparently plans to operate its own fleet of buses which would be dedicated to serving Las Lomas. It shows bus lines going from Las Lomas up SR 14 toward the Antelope Valley, west on SR 118 toward Simi Valley, down the I-5 toward Downtown Los Angeles, and down I-405 toward Century City. It is unclear who would pay for the operation of these bus lines or as to their justifiability if ridership is limited. This appears to be no more than an attempt to justify claims of a TOD and that the developer is addressing the significant traffic impacts.

Smart Growth: The project also bills itself as smart growth. The Urban Land Institute – an association of land use and development professionals and practitioners from throughout the nation and the world – identified the following list of common characteristics of smart growth. After each is a brief discussion of Las Lomas' ability to meet it:

- **Development is economically viable and preserves open space and natural resources.**

Las Lomas will grade and develop over half of the site, which is currently open space, keeping only that area which is too steep to be developed. It will grade down ridgelines, destroy riparian and oak woodland habitat, and bisect the last remaining wildlife corridor between the San Gabriel and Santa Monica Mountains.

- **Land use planning is comprehensive, integrated, and regional.**

Las Lomas does not take into consideration a regional planning perspective. The project solely concentrates on itself, not the impacts to the Santa Clarita Valley, the City of Santa Clarita, and the San Fernando Valley.

- **Public, private, and nonprofit sectors collaborate on growth and development issues to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes.**

To our knowledge, there has been little or no collaboration with the public or non-profit sectors to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes. No state or local jurisdiction has come out in support of the project. No environmental organization has expressed anything but doubt about the project. Organizations representing transit issues have expressed opposition.

- **Certainty and predictability are inherent to the development process.**

The only predictability here is a significant amount of controversy.

- **Infrastructure is maintained and enhanced to serve existing and new residents.**

No infrastructures will be maintained or enhanced to serve existing residents. The project proposes to construct 100% of its infrastructure needs. There is little or no use of existing infrastructure. The project will require all new roads, new sewer system, and new drainage facilities, new utilities, etc. The proposed improvements are necessary to accommodate the impacts from the proposed project.

- **Redevelopment of infill housing, brownfield sites, and obsolete buildings is actively pursued.**

There is no pursuit of infill or obsolete buildings. This project proposes to develop vacant open space land that is in its natural state. It will essentially eliminate the open space buffer between two urbanized areas, connecting the two into a single urbanized area.

- **Urban centers and neighborhoods are integral components of a healthy regional economy.**

The project provides an urban-type center and neighborhoods.

- **Compact suburban development is integrated into existing commercial areas, new town centers, and/or near existing or planned transportation facilities.**

As discussed earlier, it is unlikely that there will be any transportation facilities as part of this project. Even if the Metrolink station is built, the majority of the project is not within a reasonable walking distance of it.

- **Development on the fringe integrates a mix of land uses, preserves open space, is fiscally responsible, and provides transportation options.**

There is little preservation of open space, and a significant amount of open space destruction. There appears to be no feasible transportation options other than the automobile.

Las Lomas incorporates one of the nine characteristics of smart growth. It is not an example of a smart growth project.

ALTERNATIVE ACTIONS

The Council may choose to not adopt the resolution.

FISCAL IMPACT

Adopting the resolution will have no fiscal impact.

ATTACHMENTS

Resolution
Road Improvement Map